

South King County Response to Homelessness:

A Call for Action

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005, responding to a growing need to focus resources on solving homelessness in King County, county and local governments, non-profit housing and service providers, funders and state agency staff met and resolved to end homelessness. Their efforts resulted in the creation of the King County Plan to End Homelessness, *A Roof Over Every Bed in King County*, providing a framework for countywide community action directed at preventing and ending homelessness.

Using the County Plan as a guide for action, representatives of local governments, housing and service providers and funders operating in South King County began meeting in 2007 to develop strategies designed to respond to the unique issues creating homelessness in the southern part of the county. After gaining broader input from community leaders and providers through a series of meetings exploring possible solutions, nine specific strategies were developed to serve as a roadmap to action.

This plan and the strategies are designed to serve the two-fold purpose of providing housing and service providers, planners, government officials and funders with key information on the state of homelessness in South King County and a guide to strategies and actions that can be employed in a coordinated response to homelessness in our communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Homelessness in South King County

Each night in the cities and unincorporated areas of South King County, people who lack adequate resources or have disabling conditions, are found on the streets, in parks or in vehicles. Other, more fortunate persons find their way to one of the few beds that are available for homeless persons in shelters or transitional housing facilities in the area. For every homeless household on the streets or in shelters, there are several more residents of South King County communities and rural areas who are on the verge of falling into homelessness as a result of unaffordable housing, illness, disabilities, domestic violence or family dysfunction.

The 2007 count of homeless people in King County (which under-reports the actual number) found more than 2,100 unsheltered homeless persons during a 3-hour period on a January night. A much more limited count in South King County during that same period found more than 250 unsheltered homeless persons in the area – considerably under-counting actual numbers. Almost 50% were found in cars or trucks. Families made up approximately one-half of the unsheltered homeless counted. Single men numbered three times single women; many single individuals were chronically homeless. While only a few unaccompanied youth were found, they represent one of the more difficult populations to stabilize.

48% of those experiencing homelessness are families with children and these families are often the “working poor.” For low income families any number of issues may precipitate their becoming homeless – from domestic violence to a health emergency, a job loss to an emergency car repair. In 2005, 1700 students in SKC School Districts were identified as being homeless. Moreover, it is likely that over the course of the next 12 months, at least 650 South King County families with children will likely become homeless. Housing costs are a major factor in creating the risk of falling into homelessness and represent a major barrier to returning to self-sufficiency. Unprecedented rises in rents, coupled with lagging wage increases, trigger homelessness for many. Other, major underlying causes are mental illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Many homeless persons simply need a chance to succeed. Housing assistance with an array of supportive services has been found to be effective in returning people to stable living conditions again. Unfortunately, in South King County, housing for homeless individuals is extremely limited and needed services are inadequate. Fewer than 900 beds are available of which 208 are emergency shelter beds and 684 are transitional facilities. Facilities are frequently full resulting in constant turnaways and hopelessness.

A Vision for Change – Guiding Principles

To respond to these needs, the following principles guide actions to end homelessness in South King County:

1. Communication with key South King County and regional stakeholders is essential for obtaining input, identifying and building on a system of strengths, and developing the most cost-effective and efficient actions.
2. A critical element to success is effectively engaging and communicating with policy makers who can impact the net availability of both capital and operational resources.
3. There must be recognition of the fact that ending homelessness requires work across multiple systems and agencies; demands that new relationships be created to effect change; and necessitates ownership and implementation on a regional and countywide basis.
4. Homelessness can best be ended by engaging homeless populations in solutions for ending their homelessness while providing housing and services that are tailored to their specific needs.
5. The system of housing and services to prevent homelessness must reach out to those populations who are traditionally underserved.

STRATEGIES TO END HOMELESSNESS IN SOUTH KING COUNTY

Building on resources already in place and supported by the countywide Plan to End Homelessness, a series of strategies have been developed to directly address the most pressing needs of South King County communities and guide governments and agencies in working toward ending homelessness. These recognize the importance of working across jurisdictions in South King County, each of which has unique needs and capabilities, and each of which has a limited set of services and resources. The strategies in this plan are designed to develop momentum to achieve the goal of securing 3,325 housing units needed to end homelessness, while expanding services that enable homeless persons and persons at risk of homelessness to stabilize their lives. Central within the strategies is the concept of “housing first” – providing permanent housing resources for people who are homeless, or about to be homeless, coupled with case-managed wraparound services to eliminate the need for temporary or transitional housing.

The strategies were developed through a process of considering the existing, limited framework of housing and services in place and adapting proven, national best practices to the unique conditions of South King County. They require engaging the full community in working across jurisdictional lines to develop new systems and relationships to effect change.

A Call for Action

1. Develop the political and community will to prevent and end homelessness.

Actively engaging political and community leaders in understanding the issues of homelessness and in seeking solutions is a critical first step toward obtaining the community will to end it. It is essential that all major sectors of the community cooperate in planning and developing programs and activities to prevent homelessness. Information on homeless needs, best practices, as well as effective program models and approaches, needs to be developed and distributed as part of the community education process. This will require an increased capacity to coordinate actions across the whole of South King County.

2. Prevent homelessness by supporting local and regional plans to provide and maintain subsidized and private sector housing affordable to households with incomes below 30% of area median.

A key component in assuring housing stability in South King County communities is to support regional and local efforts to provide and maintain in livable condition housing resources affordable to residents with incomes at the very lowest levels. Homeless families and individuals and those “at risk” are the most vulnerable of south county residents. Housing resources need to be created to implement a “housing first” model, a nationally-proven best practice which places homeless persons into housing with supportive services rather than continue to unnecessarily disrupt their lives by moving them in and out of shelters and transitional housing. A combination of subsidized housing and partnerships with the private sector offer the best solution for preserving housing and making it available to those most in need.

3. Build on existing promising programs in South King County, both geographically and quantitatively, to provide appropriate solutions for the unique needs of all cities in South County.

Within the communities of South King County there are a number of existing programs that are achieving strong results in either preventing or ending homelessness. One of the quickest and most efficient methods of increasing the number of persons who are stabilized or moved to self-sufficiency is to expand existing programs and activities that are effective. These programs need to be publicized and expanded appropriate to the need. In addition, there are a number of national best practices that can serve as models for developing improved solutions locally. All housing and services providers and homeless planners must be prepared and aggressively take advantage of potential financial resources for homeless and homeless prevention programs.

4. Provide services and support to prevent homelessness, rapidly re-house those who have lost their housing and increase permanent supportive housing resources to prevent and end chronic homelessness.

While housing stability is a key component to ending homelessness, the vulnerability of many at risk populations requires the provision of a strong set of wrap-around services in order for the families to remain in housing. An array of services is needed to match the individual needs of homeless people, including the availability of flexible funding resources and case management. Support of coordinated regional approaches to service delivery will have a direct benefit to local programs. Research has shown the effectiveness of providing a strong coordinated outreach and intake system to assure immediate placement in housing and services appropriate to their current needs. In addition, there is a need to improve exit planning for at risk persons leaving jails, prisons, treatment facilities and foster care to prevent homelessness.

Among the most vulnerable homeless populations are those who suffer from mental illness, are chronic substance abusers or have multiple issues causing a disability. There is a need for expanding permanent housing with supportive services for this population, many of whom are chronically homeless, so that they can receive treatment and services to stabilize their lives.

5. Create and maintain sufficient shelter and transitional capacity to meet the short-term needs of homeless individuals and families.

The strategies of this plan are designed to end homelessness in South King County and rely on the ultimate creation of sufficient permanent housing resources in the community. In the interim, there is a limited-term need for the development of additional emergency and transitional housing to meet the current and expected needs of homeless persons. However, since this plan is based on building capacity for a “housing first” model where a minimum of temporary housing will be necessary, housing planning and development will need to consider in the design the potential re-use of any temporary housing resources. Once permanent housing resources are sufficient to place people in need into permanent affordable housing these structures could then be converted to permanent housing resources. In particular, there currently is a need to improve outreach to chronic homeless persons to bring them in to new permanent supportive housing and for housing with services for youth 17-24 years of age.

6. Prevent homelessness by supporting local and regional plans to provide and maintain a diversity of non-subsidized market housing affordable to households with incomes at 120% of AMI and below.

The most cost-effective method of ending homelessness is to prevent its occurrence in the first place. Given the rapid rise in housing costs and lagging increases in wages faced by South King County residents over the past few years, persons living at even moderate income levels have faced significant problems in staying in housing they can afford. Public-private partnerships involving local government and developers, landlords, and employers are needed to pursue the goal of providing affordable housing for a diverse population – housing near employment, services and public transportation.

7. Support and identify ways to partner with local and regional initiatives to prevent and end homelessness.

Homelessness is both a regional and a local issue. South King County planners and leaders need to work with other groups and organizations regionally to work on common issues. Natural partnerships need to be strengthened within South County and with regional organizations such as the King County Committee to End Homelessness, including coordination of subregional and local plans with the strategies and action steps of the countywide Plan to End Homelessness. Expansion of the areas covered in South County by the homeless census will improve information on the needs and characteristics of homeless persons in the area.

8. Prevent homelessness by supporting local and regional plans to create and expand job training, job supports, and living wage jobs so that South King County employees are able to maintain their housing.

Given the recent increases in rental and homeownership costs, individual and family incomes have been further stressed. As an added measure to make housing more affordable to a larger population, South King County supports other planning initiatives to increase the wages of persons at risk.

SOUTH KING COUNTY ACTION STEPS

Strategies	Implementing Actions	2008 Action Steps
1. Develop the political and community will to prevent and end homelessness.	1a. Support a South King County coordinator position to work across jurisdictions to continue planning and implementation of strategies.	1a1. Seek funding from local jurisdictions & regional organizations for a SKC homeless coordinator position.
	1b. Develop a community blueprint for partnerships with local businesses and landlords to use in crafting community-based solutions.	
	1c. Increase community awareness and understanding of homeless needs and solutions.	1c1. Host a SKC Homeless Summit introducing the new plan and strategies while highlighting promising local programs, practices and policies.
		1c2. Obtain community endorsement of SKC strategies (including housing and service providers, local and county government, regional organizations and funders, the faith-based community, the business community and other key organizations).
	1d. Provide targeted information and models for leaders to use to present needs and potential solutions for their communities.	1a1. Develop roll out materials customized to the perspectives of specific sectors of the SKC community.
		1a2. Develop roll out materials customized for cities in SKC outlining the specific needs, program and housing resources, recent investments and priorities of each local community and describing how they can respond to those needs through specific actions within the SKC strategies.
		1a3. Develop “quick read” briefing papers describing stories of individual homeless people and indicating what can be done to prevent homelessness and/or assist specific homeless populations.
	1e. Coordinate with other county planning groups to support the County Ten Year Plan objectives.	
	1f. Bring key teams together to address strategies for unique needs of South King County and continue to meet and develop those working relationships.	

Strategies	Implementing Actions	2008 Action Steps
2. Prevent homelessness by supporting local and regional plans to provide and maintain subsidized and private sector housing affordable to households with incomes below 30% of area median (\$24,400 or less for a household of 4).	2a. Support on-going plans to preserve existing affordable housing.	
	2b. Participate in regional efforts to assure that sufficient housing with services, for formerly homeless persons and people at-risk of homelessness, is available throughout King County.	
	2c. Build capacity of the affordable housing system in South King County and develop plan to evolve into a housing first model as a housing continuum is available.	
	2d. Support efforts to rehabilitate sub-standard multi-family housing in South King County into decent, well-run housing with appropriate services for the population housed.	2d1. Establish work groups to develop specific steps to: a) maintain the current housing stock occupied or available to low and moderate income persons; b) expand housing resources available to house homeless persons; and c) create additional permanent long-term, supportive housing resources.
3. Build on existing promising programs in South King County, both geographically and quantitatively, to provide appropriate solutions for the unique needs of all cities in South County.	3a. Publicize and share promising practices to build and expand on models already in place in South King County.	3a1. Develop a set of best practices of programs and activities currently operating in SKC.
	3b. Support and increase capacity of non-profits, faith groups, community organizations, businesses, and grassroots to contribute to the success of these models.	3b1. Increase local involvement in developing community solutions to prevent & end homelessness, by focusing on groups currently having limited involvement such as school districts, hospitals, chambers of commerce and city police departments.
	3c. Integrate proven national model approaches appropriate to the area.	3c1. Utilize available data to report out successes to funders and communities on progress in implementing the SKC strategies and the Regional 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.
	3d. Maximize the use of available and emerging financial resources to end homelessness.	3d1. Prepare to respond to funding opportunities, as they emerge, that are consistent with the strategies, such as the Vets & Human Services Levy and United Way funding.

Strategies	Implementing Actions	2008 Action Steps
<p>South King County Response to Homelessness: A Call for Action</p> <p>Executive Summary</p> <p>4. Provide services and support to prevent homelessness, rapidly re-house those who have lost their housing and increase permanent supportive housing</p>	4a. Promote a coordinated entry system of assessment and referral focusing on the individual needs of homeless persons through a system of triage and referral.	
	4b. Provide an array of services that recognizes different homeless populations have unique needs that will require different levels of service supports.	
	4c. Expand and coordinate existing service networks to increase capacity and efficiency and avoid duplication.	10
	4d. Develop programs which can be tailored to the needs and resources of individual communities.	4d1. Seek methods to expand supportive services to assist low and moderate income residents to remain in suitable housing.
		4e1. Improve coordination between providers and police

Strategies	Implementing Actions	2008 Action Steps
5. Prevent homelessness by creating & maintaining sufficient shelter and transitional capacity to meet the short-term needs of homeless individuals and families.	5a. Provide necessary shelter and transitional housing as an interim measure while additional permanent housing resources are created.	5a1. Establish work groups to develop steps strategically creating temporary emergency shelter & transitional housing to fill specific gaps until long-term housing is available.
	5b. Provide sufficient emergency shelter and services throughout South King County to relieve immediate suffering and allow triage into appropriate transitional or permanent housing.	5b1. Initiate work group to plan for day center and hygiene services (showers & laundry) in South King County.
	5c. Support King County initiatives to provide housing and services for homeless youth 17-24 in South King County where there is not current capacity.	
6. Prevent homelessness by supporting local and regional plans to provide and maintain a diversity of non-subsidized market housing affordable to households with incomes at 120% of AMI and below (\$97,680 or less for a household of 4)	6a. Explore partnerships with major South King County employers to develop affordable housing and reduce transportation/energy costs for employees.	
	6b. Coordinate with local planning departments, economic development staff and the Chambers of Commerce to develop methods of integrating housing and economic development in preventing and solving homelessness.	
7. Support and identify ways to partner with local and regional initiatives to prevent and end homelessness.	7a. Support and participate in regional initiatives.	
	7b. Support and participate in local initiatives.	
	7c. Support local and regional policy approaches with positive outcomes.	7c1. Initiate steps to identify and seek modifications of local city codes and policies that serve as barriers to the implementation of local and sub regional strategies on homelessness.
	7d. Extend the geographic area covered by the annual homeless census throughout the county and seek methods of increasing the capacity of smaller cities to participate.	7d1. Expand the areas of the county that are covered by the homeless count to provide a more accurate picture of the extent of homelessness in SKC.

Strategies	Implementing Actions	2008 Action Steps
8. Prevent homelessness by supporting local and regional plans to create and expand job training, job supports, and living wage jobs so that South King County employees are able to maintain their housing.	8a. Support other planning efforts aimed at increasing wages for persons at risk.	

How will YOU respond to homelessness? Take Action!

To download the document in its entirety, or for more information on how you can get involved, please contact:

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NOTES: